

Wet'n Wild?

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S*pending a day on the water is a great way to relax and enjoy the outdoors. Both on and off Army installations, there are a number of fun recreational activities on and around water for Soldiers and their families. Unfortunately, these same activities also have their share of danger. However, knowing your limitations and some of the hazards involved will help ensure a nice day in the sun and surf doesn't end in tragedy.*

According to the U.S. Coast Guard's 2005 statistics, 491 Americans drowned while boating. Of those, 426—a whopping 87 percent—failed to use a personal floatation device. From fiscal 2004 through Feb. 12, 2007, 30 Soldiers have died from drowning. Nine of those fatalities involved some type of watercraft, and in only one instance was the Soldier wearing a PFD. Had they used PFDs, many of these Soldiers might still be serving in our formations. By promoting the use of Coast Guard-approved PFDs while operating watercraft, we can help prevent boating fatalities.

Taking the time to put on a PFD is obviously a smart decision; however, it could be all for naught if you decide to operate a watercraft under the influence of alcohol or drugs. Coast Guard statistics reveal that a boat operator with a blood alcohol concentration above .10 percent is estimated to be more than 10 times more likely to die in an accident than a sober operator. In addition, watercraft motion, vibration, engine noise, sun, wind and spray all intensify the effects of alcohol and drugs. These environmental stressors can cause fatigue and dramatically affect a watercraft operator's coordination, judgment, vision and reaction time. Soldiers who operate or ride in watercraft must understand the effects of these stressors. Be smart and plan your water activities accordingly.

Most states and the federal government have a BAC limit of .08 percent, and it's illegal to operate a motorboat, canoe, rowboat, personal watercraft or any other vessel under the influence of alcohol. The Coast Guard and local law enforcement agencies cooperate to enforce these stringent state and federal laws. Penalties include large fines, suspension or revocation of boat operator privileges and even jail terms. Drinking alcohol and operating gasoline-fueled equipment proves the old saying "fuel and water don't mix" is true.

Another threat we normally might not consider is operating a watercraft while using prescription or over-the-counter medications. Common medications such as those for blood pressure or allergies might have side effects that can be multiplied by environmental stressors. So, boating under the influence is a factor even for those who don't drink or use illegal drugs. If you're unsure or have questions about your medications, contact your physician.

Educating our Soldiers who participate in water-related activities can help reduce the number of those who drown as a result of a boating or personal watercraft accident. Wearing a PFD can increase the survivability rate of a non-swimmer or a swimmer who suddenly finds himself in open water. Understanding your physical limitations, the effects of environmental stressors, drugs and alcohol and implementing proper controls to mitigate the risks are the keys to a safe day on the water.

For more information on boating safety, visit the International Sail and Power Association Web site at www.safeboating.com, or the U.S. Coast Guard Web site at www.uscg.mil.

According to the U.S. Coast Guard's Boating Safety Web site, about 25 to 35 people die every year as a result of being struck by the propeller and/or propulsion unit of their boat. An additional 200 to 250 people suffer non-fatal injuries from mishaps. When operating a boat with a propeller, follow these simple steps:



- Look before starting the engine
- Never exit or enter from the rear while the engine is running
- Educate your passengers on propeller awareness
- Take extra care when towing passengers
- Never permit riders on the boat's tail

FYI

Plan on spending the day operating a watercraft? If so, leave the alcohol on shore. Here are some typical ways boating under the influence can affect an operator:

- Your peripheral vision, night vision, focus and ability to distinguish colors (particularly red and green) diminish.
- Your inner ear can be disturbed, making it impossible to distinguish up from down if you fall in the water.
- A physical sensation of warmth might make it easier to fall victim to hypothermia.
- Your cognitive abilities and judgment deteriorate.
- Your balance and coordination are impaired.
- Your reaction time decreases.

Something Fishy Going On

Would you consider fishing a high-risk activity? Would it even register if one of your Soldiers told you they were going fishing this weekend? Tragically, in December 2006, two Soldiers lost their lives while fishing at a local lake. Were they drinking? Nope, alcohol wasn't a factor. Here's what happened: One of the Soldiers was a non-swimmer, and neither wore a personal floatation device. When a storm blew in, the weather conditions drastically changed the water's surface conditions. The Soldiers' small vessel was no longer suitable for the conditions and capsized.

Wearing heavy winter clothing and no PFDs, these Soldiers never stood a chance of surviving this tragic event.

- Leaders should take time to educate Soldiers on safe boating practices, placing a special emphasis on wearing PFDs.
- Encourage Soldiers to take a boating safety course before getting on the water.
- Leaders must ensure their Soldiers understand the Composite Risk Management process and apply it during off-duty recreational activities.